

Faith And Doubt Among Young Modern Orthodox

Millennials struggling with theological 'fundamentals,' according to new survey; social aspect of Orthodoxy looms large.

BY HANNAH DREYFUS | October 3, 2017, 4:01 pm | [🔗](#)



Talia Weisberg, a recent graduate of Harvard University, recalled a professor of religion going through his course syllabus and nonchalantly dismissing the biblical story of Jonah as nonsense.

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“Let me tell you why this is all bulls**t,” he said, after Weisberg, a religion major who is Modern Orthodox, volunteered to summarize the volume’s storyline.

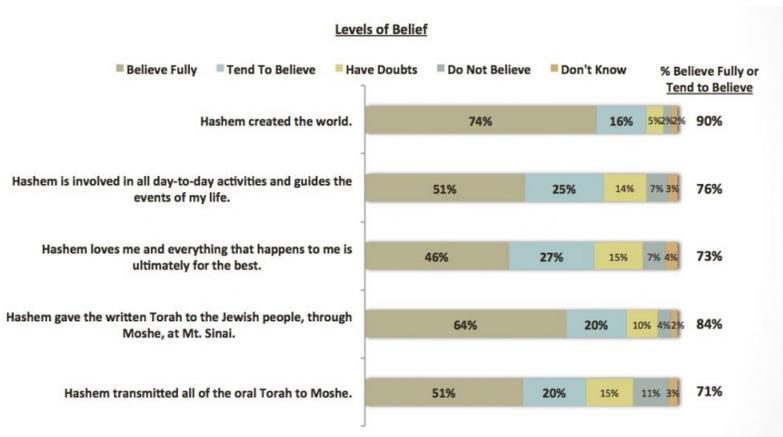
Weisberg decided to drop the course. She said the professor was not representative of the other religion courses she took at Harvard.

Still, the professor’s comments — and the challenge it posed to her Modern Orthodox faith, which demands belief in divine authorship of the Pentateuch and divine influence over its accompanying scriptures — was quite familiar.

“It doesn’t shock me that young people are having more issues with faith than ever before,” said Weisberg, 22, who attended a right-wing Orthodox all-girls high school before attending Harvard.

The recent, [first-ever study on the Modern Orthodox community](#), reported on here for the first time last week, found data to support Weisberg’s intuitions. The study shows more wavering on Orthodox theological fundamentals — including full belief that God loves his creations (at 46 percent) and the bible was given at Sinai (64 percent) — than one might expect. Results were based on an opt-in survey rather than a random sample; nearly 4,000 self-identified ‘Modern Orthodox’ responded.

Among millennial respondents (aged 18 to 34), belief in God and the divinity of Torah decreased across the board compared to older respondents. While 86 percent of respondents aged 55 and older believe the Torah was given at Sinai, only 78 percent of younger respondents believe the same thing. While 71 percent of those 55 and older believe the oral Torah was given to Moses — condensed into the Talmud— 62 percent of younger respondents said they adhere to that belief.



Courtesy of Nishma Research

While the percentage of believers remains high among the young Modern Orthodox — especially when compared to the declining numbers of religious young people

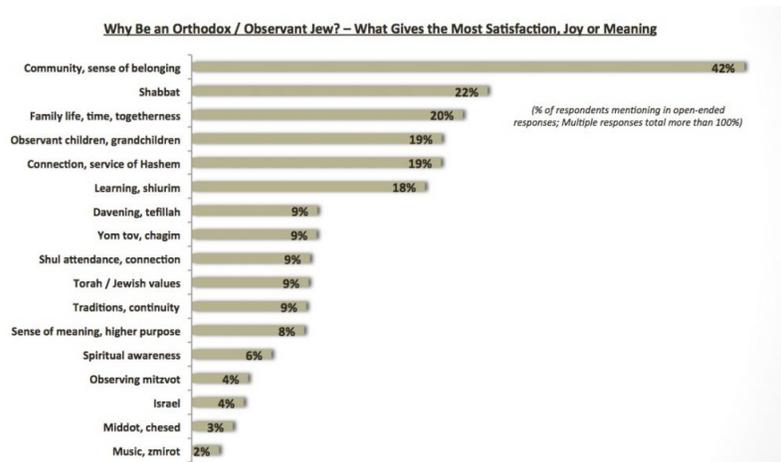
overall in the United States, according to a 2015 Pew [religious landscape study](#) — the numbers remain statistically significant, according to lead researcher and author of the survey Mark Trencher.

“These numbers demand some communal self-reflection,” said Trencher.

Steven Bayme, director of Contemporary Jewish Life at the American Jewish Committee, said that there is “more theological ferment on the ground than one would hear from pulpits.”

“Don’t take Orthodox theology for granted,” he said. “There is clearly questioning beneath the surface.”

Another significant finding: In an open-ended question, the overwhelming majority of respondents — 42 percent — gave “community and a sense of belonging” as the key driver of Orthodox observance. The second most frequent response — at 22 percent — was Shabbat, followed by family life. Connection to God garnered 19 percent, and prayer, “higher purpose” and “Torah/Jewish values” all received less than 10 percent.



Courtesy of Nishma Research

Modern Orthodox millennials were quick to offer insight on the results.

“The assumption made about the Orthodox most often is that we are unthinking followers of religious demands who don’t have opinions or doubts,” said Akiva Weisinger, 26, a Modern Orthodox graduate of Yeshiva University’s rabbinical school. “Don’t buy our propaganda — that is not true of most Orthodox people.”

Seeking fellow questioners, Weisinger started a private Facebook group in August 2014 called “God Save Us From Your Opinion: A Place for Serious Discussion of Judaism.” Those looking to probe more deeply into traditional Judaism — especially when in conflict with modernity — signed on. The now-17,000-member group routinely entertains questions about biblical criticism, the shifting status of women and the likelihood of divine intervention.

Regarding the strong social cohesion that is the primary driver of Orthodox observance, according to the survey, Weisinger was not surprised.

“It’s foolhardy to think that anyone is religious purely because all of this is the unquestionable word of God,” said Weisinger, who was actually “surprised” by the high percentages of reported beliefs. The fact that those with serious doubts still count themselves “in the camp” was encouraging, he said. The strong social promise of Orthodoxy and increasing theological doubts were not in conflict:

“What’s keeping them [those with doubts] in the community is clearly a sense of belonging, and not necessarily ideological identification,” he said.

“Social Orthodoxy” — a relatively new concept that places community at the center of Orthodox life rather than belief — is particularly pronounced on college campuses, said Rabbi Shlomo Zuckier, the immediate past co-director of the JLIC — an Orthodox Union-sponsored project to connect Orthodox Jews on college campuses — at Yale University.

“On campus, the social aspect of religion is very pronounced,” said Zuckier. “Questions that animate people are more about the nature of Jewish community — who’s in, who’s out.” The conversation about who can be an Orthodox rabbi is far more likely to “dominate the public discourse” than questions about God or belief, he said.

Leah Sarna, a fourth-year student at Yeshivat Maharat, a rabbinical school for female Orthodox clergy, said in her experience, the “Modern Orthodox community does not exclude based on beliefs.”

When someone has a “crisis of faith,” Sarna views it as an opportunity to bring that person closer to his/her tradition.

“Our library holds a lot for these people — it is comforting to know that you are not the first person to struggle with these questions. We have a tradition of questioning.”

Sarna — who herself participated in the survey — commented on the significantly higher levels of doubt recorded among the liberal Orthodox camps. “It’s hard to know what those numbers mean — on the right, people might have doubts but not be willing to admit them. The left-wing community is more open about doubts.”



Leah Sarna. Courtesy of Yeshivat Maharat

Though survey results might compel some, especially in more right-wing camps, to decry the infiltrating influence of secular knowledge, she is “not convinced by that,” she said. A graduate of Yale with a degree in philosophy, she said her exposure to the “complexity of the world made me more inclined towards a pure, authentic faith.”

Yaakov Bressler, a theater producer in his mid-20s, grew up in a black-hat community in Flatbush. Though he has “drifted” away from the “yeshivish” system, he still defines himself on the right-wing end of Modern Orthodoxy.

Growing up, he recalled that “faith wasn’t a part of the curriculum” at the yeshiva he attended. “It was assumed that all students had faith — it was not a discussion.” The emphasis, instead, was on scholarship and mastering the “logic and processes” of the Talmud.

For others, learning the halachic process is not enough to keep them in the community’s tight fold. Binyamin Weinreich, 26, raised in the sprawling Modern Orthodox community in Teaneck, N.J., spent many of his high school and college years feeling at odds with the community.

“Torah mi’Sinai [the belief that God gave the Torah at Sinai] and God creating the world were my two main issues,” said Weinreich, whose education took place exclusively at Orthodox schools. “A naturalistic view seemed more compelling.”

With a “handful” of exceptions, he had few people to speak to ask about his doubts. “There was this overpowering assumption that this is what you had to believe to stay in the community — and I didn’t want to be out.”

As an undergraduate at Yeshiva University, he no longer brought up his questions. “I didn’t want people to judge me,” he said. “I didn’t want them to know the extent of my doubts.”

A close friend he met during college, whom he described as having “an unshakable personal belief,” helped him confront his doubts, and build up a comfort-level with the unknown. “I came to see a worldview that required assumptions, but not necessarily invalid assumptions. I realized the religious world could be embraced on its own terms.”

Today, a fourth-year student at Yeshiva University’s rabbinical school, Weinreich expects to go into Jewish education. He plans to make clear to his students that he is “interested in discussing beliefs” and that no question is beyond the pale.

“We tell our students what to do, but we don’t guide them in how to think,” said Weinreich. “I want to encourage students to have a positive sense of what they do believe, rather than a vague sense of what they should believe.”